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Orion Samuelson Addresses IWU Luncheon

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The greatest characteristic defining American agriculture is change, according to Orion Samuelson, renowned agribusiness director of WGN and Chicago's "Voice of Agriculture" since 1960. More than 350 area business leaders turned out to hear Samuelson speak at the spring Illinois Wesleyan Associates Luncheon on Tuesday, April 17 at the IWU Shirk Center Performance Gym (302 E. Emerson St., Bloomington).

A recording of the entire ceremony is available on the Illinois Wesleyan University Web site, www.iwu.edu.

"The word I hear more often than any other today is change: the change in your land and in my land, in your profession and in my profession, in agriculture and industry and education," said Samuelson. "And as human beings we resist change. We tend to fight change and be comfortable with the status quo."

In his lecture titled "From Reaper to Satellite," Samuelson spoke about the transformation agriculture has faced over the past eighty years, from the introduction of the tractor in the 1920s to today's globalization of the market, which provides food for 300 million Americans and millions more overseas. "Think for a moment of the change you and I have seen over our lives," he said, adding that what happens in agriculture affects us all. "If you eat, you are involved in agriculture."

Born and raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, Samuelson experienced much of the change, relating stories of when electricity reached his rural farm in 1948 and allowed the family to hook up their first milking machine. "About 10 of the cows wouldn't take to the machine, and it was my job to milk those cows by hand, and that is why I am a five-time Illinois State Fair milking champion. Don't mess with these hands," joked Samuelson.

During his often-humorous speech, Samuelson touched on the difficulties farmers face to bring about a crop. "The challenge of producing food in this country is enormous," he said, due to elements such as weather and finances. Throughout his life, he has seen the low of farm closures in the 1980s due to soaring interest rates, and the high of today's corn prices driven by

the increasing desire for ethanol. "In the 54 years I have been on the air covering agriculture, this past 12 months has been the most fascinating, most challenging and the most upbeat of my career," said Samuelson, speaking about the unusual combination of the high prices of corn along with a strong crop yield. "There is a feeling in agriculture that this trend is going to last a while."

According to Samuelson, the next change will play off the new surge of ethanol, with companies looking to find sources other than corn to use as a source. "Anything that cuts our dependence on foreign oil is a benefit to all of us," said Samuelson.

The idea that America feeds the world represents the greatest change for agriculture overall, said Samuelson. "Globalization has driven technology and mechanization and everything else related to agriculture," he said. "Like it or not, over 95 percent of the world's population lives outside the United States. We need the world to buy what we produce."

The future of agriculture lies in education, said Samuelson, who admitted he gave up a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin to pursue broadcasting. "Do as I say and not as I do," he said with a laugh, encouraging students in the audience to educate themselves for what they want. "You cannot dream big enough. If you dream big, you will find yourself realizing that dream, and you will have to dream bigger," he said.

Illinois Wesleyan Associates, founded in 1953 with Adlai H. Rust and Clarence W. Heyl as co-chairmen, consists of McLean County business and professional leaders interested in the advancement and support of private higher education.

Considered to be one of the country's most prolific broadcasters, Samuelson has provided the Midwestern farmer with agricultural news and information for over 40 years. In conjunction with his associate, Max Armstrong, he presents 16 daily agribusiness reports on the WGN radio station and on the morning and noontime shows. Samuelson's syndicated National Farm Report airs on 260 radio stations daily and his weekly Samuelson Sez is broadcasted on 110 stations. He was inducted into the National Radio Hall of Fame in Chicago and named a Laureate of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois in May 2001. Samuelson serves as Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Agricultural Leadership Foundation and formerly served as a trustee of the Farm Foundation.

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